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SUBJECT: ENTREPRENEURS RALLY AGAINST HIRING LAWS

Ref: Minsk 849

1. (SBU) About 800 members of the Perspektiva entrepreneurs' association protested November 19 in Minsk's Bangalore Square Park against the Lukashenko regime's plans to limit hiring by individual entrepreneurs. Under banners that read, "Getting married, employment assured," "No family members -- Kiosk for sale," and "With laws like these, we'll lose our shirts," market vendors protested a presidential edict set to enter into force January 1, 2008 that will limit individual entrepreneurs to a maximum of three employees, all of whom must be close family members (reftel).

2. (SBU) The demonstrators were a diverse group, ranging in age from early twenties to mid-fifties, with comparable numbers of men and women. Judging by protestors' signs, the rally included participation from Minsk, Mogilyov, Gomel and Slonim. Poloffs observed the peaceful protest rally, which had been approved in advance by Minsk city authorities. Electricity, not always available for demonstrations, powered the small PA system that organizers used to address the crowd. Police presence at the demonstration was the lightest for any protest action this year. Several plainclothes officers were present at the periphery of the gathering, and one paddy wagon and three additional police vehicles were parked two blocks from the demonstration site.

Comment

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3. (SBU) Though it received little advance fanfare, Perspektiva's demonstration was well organized and well attended, particularly for a rally by a single organization. It is proof that Belarusians can and will protest the regime's measures when their livelihoods are at stake.

Stewart